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The Liberal Establishment

BY NICK B. WILLIAMS

One of the curious allegations against the press is that there exists in its bosom a "liberal establishment."

It is even more curious that none of the newspapers alleged to be party to the "establishment" have made a noticeable effort to demonstrate that the allegation is in fact poppycock. They seem, on the contrary, to be mildly proud of it, as if including them among an "establishment" were some kind of badge of quality.

But the allegation is not intended by those who make it to be an honor. The purpose, instead, is to imply a sort of elite conspiracy that seeks in unison to thwart the will of the "common people."

The concept of a "common people" is silly to begin with, but the allegation is not silly, and its repetition is no sillier than Goebbels' formula that a lie repeated often enough will be believed. The purpose of the allegation is to weaken and if necessary to destroy the independence of the press—to achieve by propaganda what the Constitution forbids by law.

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Those who speak of the "liberal establishment" now seem most often to include in it The Los Angeles Times, the New York Times, the Washington Post, the Boston Globe and the St. Louis Post Dispatch. In Georgia they list the Atlanta Constitution, in Florida the Miami Herald, in Kentucky the Louisville Courier-Journal. In Chicago it is the Sun-Times; in Baltimore, the Sun; on Long Island, it's Newsday. And there are others listed from time to time, depending on what they are saying about current political issues.

Each of these newspapers tends to reflect the sociological and economic best interest of the area in which it is published, and to that extent each of them differs in details from the editorial attitudes of the others. But all of them do have two major characteristics in common—the characteristics which inspire the allegation of an "establishment." Their editorial policies are basically independent and basically moderate.

Those who allege an "establishment" would find it difficult to decide which is more reprehensible, independence or moderation. But probably the latter, for moderation is anathema to extremist partisans. What does not seem to matter is that, taken as a whole, the predominating center of the "common people" is itself com-

posed of moderates—the moderate Republicans and the moderate Democrats, extremist elements of both parties are minorities, usually within each party and most always in the nation.

The "liberal establishment" newspapers thus tend to reflect the predominating center, presumably the "common people," always with complete accuracy and no ways uniformly throughout the nation and the press as a whole tends to react rather than to decide the political attitude of the people, although it is the press takes the blame most often from all politicians and government functionaries.

Extremists by definition tend to agree vehemently among their kind, while moderates equally by definition tend to disagree within a broader spectrum. It is the weakness of the moderate center also its strength, permitting as it does compromise of disagreements. And this capacity for compromise that enervates the extremists of both major parties.

Political endorsements by those newspapers often listed in the "liberal establishment" are not a definitive analysis of moderate capacity to disagree, but at least at them, from 1952 to 1968, does not dissipate the myth of a tightly aligned conspiracy to thwart the will of the common people. A workable conspiracy, a workable philosophy, requires more conformity than the record shows. The obvious explanation is that with the single exception of 1960, when Sen. Barry Goldwater was the Republican nominee, the candidates of each major party were nearer to the center than to its extreme, near enough in fact that newspapers with strongly similar principles could disagree on which candidate they endorsed.

It seems plausible, in the labeling game, that Adlai Stevenson was more liberal than Dwight Eisenhower, yet according to Editor and Publisher magazine, here is how the "liberal establishment" newspapers chose to endorse in 1952:

For Eisenhower: The Los Angeles Times, the New York Times, the Washington Post, the Miami Herald, the Chicago Sun-Times and the Baltimore Sun. Long Island Newsday was not listed. It also should be noted that in 1952, the Los Angeles Times was not described by anyone as part of the "liberal establishment."

For Stevenson: The St. Louis Post Dispatch, the Louisville Courier-Journal and the Atlanta Constitution. The Boston Globe made no endorsement. In the entirety of the press, Stevenson was supported by 14%, Eisenhower by 67%, the rest not endorsing.

In 1956, Stevenson's percentage of endorsement by the entirety of the press climbed only to 15%, while Eisenhower's percentage declined slightly to 62%. The "liberal establishment" divided this way:

probably had no original effect, but the water ran against Lyndon Johnson. Then it was a regional thing, the "Eastern liberal establishment." But since then the myth has acquired a national connotation. Of the newspapers currently described as party to the "establishment" only The Los Angeles Times endorsed Goldwater, who received 356 endorsements from the press as a whole compared to Johnson's 440, with 250 declining to endorse. The landslide result of the election showed the "liberal establishment" to be reflective of the electorate.

In 1968, Mr. Nixon won the endorsement of 634 dailies, actually fewer endorsements than he had in 1960 when he ran against Kennedy, while Hubert Humphrey with 146 endorsements had fewer than supported Kennedy in 1960. The "liberal establishment" newspapers again divided about as they did in 1960.

For Nixon: The Los Angeles Times, the Miami Herald, the Chicago Sun-Times, the

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Williams was editor of The Times from 1958 until his retirement last year.